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Missing POWs: an issue we can't forget

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Have you noticed that these days there is more news about American prisoners of war in Vietnam than there has been for the past 10 years?

One of the reasons is that U.S. POWs still are being held by the North Vietnamese — and that America's leaders have chosen to ignore the issue.

Not long after I became a congressman, I attended a private Pentagon briefing on POWs held in both Laos and Vietnam. While showing me transcripts of electronic eavesdropping, and some satellite photography, Adm. Jerry Tuttle, head of the Defense Intelligence Agency's POW/MIA branch, said, "There are definitely American POWs held against their will over there . . . maybe up to 100 or more."

What was his evidence? Everything ranging from aerial pictures to radio intercepts to the hundreds of refugees fleeing their Communist oppressors. No one report was conclusive, but taken in all, as Adm. Tuttle said, "The evidence is overwhelming."

The Americans held there are, for the most part, pilots and officers shot down over Laos and North Vietnam. They are held in small groups, anywhere from two to 12, guarded by a combination of Laotian and Vietnamese soldiers. They are chained together and are forced to do slave labor by day and to sleep in bamboo cages at night. They are moved around, as in a shell game, to prevent a rescue attempt and to keep the local population from having contact with them.

Many of these prisoners are the best products of American education; some are graduates of Annapolis or the Air Force Academy. They hold advanced degrees in electronics, radar, engineering, and physics.

Among a population that is basically illiterate, these POWs are virtual warehouses of information, not the least of which is how to run and repair the more than \$1 billion in American equipment we left behind when we withdrew from Vietnam 10 years ago.

Why are the Vietnamese still holding these American POWs? It goes back to Jan. 27, 1973, when the United States and North Vietnam signed the Paris Peace Accords, which provided for the return of all POWs in Vietnam. Neighboring Laos was not a participant, and no provision was made for the return of POWs there. To this day, none of the 569 men lost in Laos has ever been returned.

On Feb. 1, 1973, President Richard Nixon sent Premier Pham Van Dong a letter pledging \$3.25 billion in reconstruction funds if Hanoi honored the treaty — and if Congress appropriated the money. In exchange, Hanoi was to provide a complete list of all POWs in Laos. It did not. To this day, it has provided no information on the 569.

Meanwhile, Congress made it clear that it would not appropriate the \$3.25 billion. But Hanoi had shrewdly created an insurance policy against the possibility that the money would not be forthcoming: the POWs in Laos were a bargaining chip.

Henry Kissinger, architect of the treaty and then national security adviser, dispatched Robert C. McFarlane — until recently President Reagan's national security adviser — to make a new offer: America would exchange \$100 million in medicine for the rest of the POWs. Hanoi did not deny that it still had POWs; instead, it countered, it didn't want just the \$100 million; it wanted the \$3.25 billion Mr. Nixon promised. With Congress unwilling to appropriate that sum, and Hanoi unwilling to settle for less, the administration was stuck.

Just when the public should have been informed of the dilemma,

Watergate convulsed the nation. Vietnam and Laos were quickly replaced on the evening news by Woodward and Bernstein.

The remaining POWs, who all sides admitted were still there, were abandoned. (By the way, history has shown that it is a standard war tactic of Communist nations to keep enemy

POWs after a war for future negotiating position: witness Moscow's keeping German POWs for 10 years, Peking's keeping U.S. POWs from the Korean War for 21 years, and Hanoi's keeping French prisoners from Dien Bien Phu from 1954 until 1980.)

Now, 12 years after the Paris Peace Accords, the truth is finally coming out.

Amazingly, little has changed. Hanoi continues to link the return, or "finding," of these U.S. POWs to better relations with Washington. Just

recently, a high-ranking Vietnamese diplomat said trade with the United States was a prerequisite to "asking our peasants to look for your missing soldiers."

However, as I learned in Congress, the real problem in achieving return of these POWs lies not just in Hanoi but also in Washington. Indeed, this whole issue exemplifies all that is wrong with our government: bureaucratic ineptitude, turf-fighting, a blase attitude, political cowardice, and placing personal ambition ahead of duty.

President Reagan has repeatedly stated that the case of the POWs and the MIAs is of "the highest national priority" in his administration. Yet former United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick told me recently that while she was a member of both the Cabinet and the National Security Council, the subject of POWs was never once mentioned in any meeting she attended during the first Reagan term.

If it is of the highest national priority, why is it that only an Army lieutenant colonel is running the day-to-day supervision of all POW-

related activities? Is that an indication of the "highest" priority?

And here's how well the departments work together to bring these men home. By law, the Defense Intelligence Agency has the charter to collect all information on POWs, but is not empowered and has no budget or agents to run "human intelligence" operations to verify reports.

That task belongs to the Central Intelligence Agency. But the CIA doesn't tell the DIA what it is doing or what it has found.

Meanwhile, over at the State Department, the standard line is, "We have no evidence that there are any POWs still alive."